

Jun 10 2010

Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Michael Gove: Proud of the British Empire

LSE Ideas

By Inderjeet Parmar

Michael Gove, Britain's school's secretary, recently asked pro-British empire historians, Andrew Roberts and Niall Ferguson, to recast the history curriculum to provide a "narrative" centred around Britain's imperial glories in the context of the global domination of the West over the past 500 years. As Seumas Milne argues in his excellent column in *The Guardian* (10 June, 2010), this merely revives the imperial project that became popular among Anglo-American elites after 1989, and found enthusiastic support from New Labour.

New Labour leadership contest front-runner, David Miliband, is quoted in *The Guardian* today as saying "George Bush was the worst thing that happened to Tony Blair." Not for the first time, USBlog wonders what Miliband meant by that remark. Could it be that Miliband is suggesting that Blair was duped into following Bush into the global war on terror, into Afghanistan and Iraq? That, had it not been for Bush, Blair's approach to world politics would have been significantly different?

As Seumas Milne says, Gordon Brown once remarked that "Britain was not about to apologise for the Empire", and Blair's principal foreign policy adviser, Robert Cooper, published articles and books calling for a "new liberal imperialism" by "post-modern/modern states" against "pre-modern states" that lived by the laws of the jungle. Cooper's view was that, in dealings with pre-modern states, Britain, the US and EU need not concern themselves with truth, international law and diplomacy, as cruelty and deception was all that such states understood.

Tony Blair, on the advice of his former FCO 'minder' and future chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, had wanted to tell a Manchester audience in 1997, just ahead of the general election, that he, Blair, was "proud of the British empire". Blair drew back at the last minute and did not deliver that particular line of his speech. But Blair's liberal imperialism was not extinguished; it found new outlets as time wore on.

Blair told an American audience in 1999, 'If we can establish and spread the values of liberty, the rule of law, human rights, and an open society then that is in our national interests too. The spread of our values makes us safer'. Blair, who was comfortable being compared with President Woodrow Wilson – who famously waged a war to 'make the world safe for democracy', was on a mission to re-make the world. His arguments for military intervention for halting humanitarian crises and promoting democracy despite the inevitable violation of national sovereignty this necessitated were central to his imperial outlook.

Summed up, an imperial tendency emerged as a powerful force in Anglo-American foreign affairs, reminiscent of an earlier age. 'Democratic peace theory' (whose central claim is that democracies don't fight wars against each other) was its ideological higher truth, Britain and America the powers chosen by destiny to impose it on selected parts of the world. This is a twenty-first century version of the imperial civilising mission and of manifest destiny, welcomed by some and rejected by others as hubris. American-style political and economic capitalist democracy is declared suitable for export in a globalising world, another self-evident truth. The mission relies on the former colonial world forgetting Britain's record of imperial domination, and amnesia about America's post-1945 record of military interventions against leftist-nationalist governments and installation of right-wing military juntas.

Blair's Christianity was central to his sense of mission. Such belief has its radical, critical side – it questions the way things are, demands change and improvement. As Blair wrote in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1996, being a Christian means 'you see the need for change around you and accept your duty to do something.' To Blair, Christianity is also 'a very tough religion... It places a duty, an imperative on us to reach our better self and to care about creating a better community to live in.... It is judgemental. There is right and wrong. There is good and bad...[although] it has become fashionable to be uncomfortable about such language. But when we look at our world today and how much needs to be done, we should not hesitate to make such judgements. And then follow them with determined action. That would be Christian socialism.' Blair's references to the utility of Jesus in every day life suggest something of the southern US evangelical protestant.

There is also, of course, a strong strain of Gladstonian moralism in Blair's global outlook. That combined well with the rising centre-left sentiment favouring humanitarian interventionism during the 1990s, especially with reference to events in the Balkans. Activist writers like David Rieff and the International Commission on Interventionism and State Sovereignty – of which the now Harvard scholar, Michael Ignatieff, was a member, championed the cause of people suffering from the brutal excesses within states, beyond the reach of international law and the United Nations. According to Rieff, such tendencies, however, were appropriated by political forces – such as the American neo-conservatives in the Bush administration and by Tony Blair – that were far more imperialistic in their outlook and used the rhetoric of humanitarian intervention in a range of cases – such as Kosovo and Iraq – that fell beyond the original thinking behind the strategy.

The foreign policy of (late 19th-early 20th century) 'New Liberals' that Tony Blair admired so much back in the 1990s – such as almost the entire leadership of the imperialist Round Table movement and of its offspring, Chatham House – was to strengthen the bonds of the British Empire through imperial reform and alliance (and even federation) with the United States. The underlying rationale was founded on a racialised world-view based on Anglo-Saxon biological and cultural superiority. By the Second World War, the desire among some sections of British and American elite opinion was for a Federal Union between Britain and its Dominions and the United States, and the Scandinavian democracies. This was proposed on the basis that Anglo-Saxons, and one or two Nordic nations, were uniquely suited to good government, economic development, and to protection of the rights of the individual. The missionary zeal that inspired domestic reform had its overseas counterpart in imperial reform and Anglo-Saxonism.

The point here relating to Tony Blair is that such ideas, in an evolved and more 'sophisticated' form, came back into circulation in the 1990s and remain significant in leading policy circles in Britain and the United States.

And this is where David Miliband comes in with his remark that George W Bush was the worst thing that happened to Blair. He should look at Blair's history: at the Lord Mayor's banquet in November 1997, when the White House was not even a twinkle in Bush's eye, Blair set out his vision – 'the big picture' – for Britain and the world, so that its 'standing in the world ... [would] grow and prosper.' Britain's principal strength is/was its ability to use its historical alliances so that 'others listen.' 'I value and honour our history enormously,' Blair emphasised. The fact that we had an Empire – about which 'a lot of rubbish [is] talked' – should be cause of neither apology nor hand wringing; rather it must be used to further Britain's global influence – through the Commonwealth and through the power of the English language. Britain must look outward – we are the world's second largest importer and exporter of foreign investment. What goes on in the rest of the world is, therefore, of vital importance. Britain must rebuild the special relationship with the United States, which the Major government had wrecked, Blair argued. 'When Britain and America work together on the international scene there is little we cannot achieve.' 'We must never forget the historic or continuing US role in defending the political and economic freedoms we take for granted.... they are a force for good in the world. They can always be relied on when the chips are down. The same should always be true of Britain'.

9-11 was, then, a perfect opportunity for Blairites to size the moment. As former Blair ally, Mark Leonard, noted, 9-11 offered a golden chance to rebuild the world order, to further the concept of international community and to promote "security".

Although the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the economic-financial crisis, have dampened imperial ardour, they have yet to extinguish it. Not for nothing was the 'war on terror' re-named the 'long war' or the 'generational war': Anglo-American imperial hubris remains at large; and an imperial narrative in the school history curriculum, contested though it would be, would keep alive the flame of the British empire.

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